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ABSTRACT

This report examines the educational experiences of students with disabilities from the students' perspectives. It was prepared to encourage state education agency staff and those involved in school reform to hear the ideas of students and to expand ways in which students can be involved in planning for change. Themes identified in the report include: qualities of a good teacher, lasting images and the perceptions of others, students' views of inclusive environments, and students' views of how school prepared them for life. Student comments suggest that students' relationships with individual teachers were central to their school experiences. Good teachers were those who listened to individual students, showed their personal sides, allowed students to experience the curriculum individually, promoted peer relationships between students with and without disabilities, and recognized students' potential. The disabled students identified areas of needed attitude change and were in favor of inclusion. The report concludes with six questions that offer a guide for more actively involving students. An appendix describes the methodology of the qualitative research, which involved focus group interviews with 33 individuals with disabilities, from children to young adults. (Contains 33 references.) (JDD)

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ED 379 885

A Snapshot of the "Perfect" School

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Western Regional Resource Center
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EC 303759

A Snapshot of the "Perfect" School

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Preface

"I don't think there is such a thing as a perfect school. If we had a perfect school then the world would be perfect; it isn't."

As policy makers, educators, families, and communities undertake the restructuring of local schools, the voices of students can only faintly be heard as contributors to the change process. Recognizing the need to address the concerns of consumers, some of us from the Western Regional Resource Center decided to ask some students with disabilities to tell us about their own educational experiences and how they could be improved.

In this document, we offer a collection of perspectives based on interviews with some students with disabilities about their education. While providing only a glimpse at student experiences and points of view, we hope the document will provide some sense of how students talk about school and what kinds of experiences are remembered. It was our intent, in creating this document, to encourage state education agency staff and those involved in the process of school reform to hear the ideas of all students and to expand the ways in which students are involved in planning for change.

We conclude with questions that emerged as we read through the students' comments. We hope the questions will guide you as you consider how to more actively involve students. Perhaps even more questions will surface from your reading, questions that will help you and your colleagues identify new ways to expand the roles of students in your strategic planning process.

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Rumbles Of Change And Movements Toward Improvement

It is difficult to pick up literature in education without reading about the issues related to school reform or educational restructuring (Carnegie Forum, 1986; Goodlad, 1984; Kahne, Goren, & Amsler, 1991; Lightfoot, 1984; National Commission for Excellence in Education, 1983; Sarason, 1990; Sizer, 1984). Even today's students talk about the changes that are happening in their schools. From these dialogues come the ideas that schools need to prepare students for life as contributing members in their community (Rusch, Destefano, Chadsey-Rusch, Phelps, & Szymanski, 1992), that student outcomes must align with values (Finn, 1990), that we must prepare students to "world-class" standards of excellence to keep us competitive in the world economy (National Education Goals Panel, 1991), that teachers must provide "inclusive environments" for all students (NASBE, 1992; Sailor, 1989) and that more dialogue and collaborative efforts among regular educators and special educators are necessary (Stainback, Stainback, & Forest, 1989; Thousand & Villa, 1990).

Whether these changes are bringing us closer to common goals and values and ultimately improving the education for all children remains open to question. Some higher education systems are considering ways to collaborate in teacher training programs (Stainback, Stainback, & Forest, 1989; Syracuse University, 1991). State-level administrators consider the possibility of certification programs that will certify teachers to teach students of all abilities. Educational researchers look for ways to improve teaching strategies for the inclusion of a wide range of students in the same learning environments (Ferguson, Meyer, Jeanchild, Juniper, & Zingo, 1992; Giangreco & Putman, 1990; Lipsky & Gartner 1989). Principals and teachers are looking for ways to "untrack" students, build better home-school partnerships (Wheelock, 1992) and to develop school-based management systems (Conley, 1991; Malen, 1990). Reflective of these reform movements is the development of new terminology. For example, "inclusion" has become a commonplace word on many special education conference agendas and in teacher lounges across the country. As educational systems are moved by the tides of change, the students of America ride the waves created by those around them.

In order to determine the needs of the primary consumers of school reform, and to obtain data related to the educational needs of students with disabilities, we at the Western Regional Resource Center (WRRC) conducted the Consumers and Schools Project. The specific purpose of the project was to collect some insights

from students with disabilities about their school experiences, courses and teachers. We recognized that the literature and the strategic planning efforts of professionals rarely included student perspectives. What do the students think about school? Particularly, what do students with disabilities have to say about their schooling experiences? Our goal was to provide professionals in the position of making school change a way to hear the voice of the individuals most directly impacted by the reform: **the students**.

Our study methodology was open-ended allowing students to identify their issues rather than employing predetermined assumptions. Also, we recognized that there was a need to hear from a variety of individuals with disabilities. Individuals with varying disabilities and unique characteristics were included in the project. A brief summary of the methods employed in the project is included in the appendix.

We believe this report will provide others interested in improving the educational environment of America's students an opportunity to hear the voices of those central to the reform movement. Much of what is reproduced here is in the words of the students. Some of the "rich" data may be too "thick" and descriptive by some standards. However, for the purposes of this study the words of the students were a personal and powerful method of helping us to understand how they experience and absorb the efforts of educators.

The themes identified in this document include: qualities of a good teacher, lasting images and the perceptions of others, students' views of inclusive environments and students' views for how school prepared them for life. Consistently, student responses to our questions referred to experiences with individual teachers. It appears that the students' relationships with teachers were central to their school experiences. "The snapshot of the perfect school" represents pieces of data that reflect the students' thoughts related to improving schools. While only a few themes are presented in this document, some students had a variety of ideas for the ways educators might make changes. One student suggested that parents should not "just say good-bye to them" and "send them off to school." Continued interviewing might further explore ideas related to the ways students believed families were involved in their education.

It is important to stress that the data presented here are only "snapshots" of a selected group of students. There is no claim that these "snapshots" represent a larger group of students with disabilities. Interesting questions arise as to how these views may be similar to peers who do not experience a disability, or how individuals with different disabilities may have similar or different views. Regardless of how these questions are answered, we hope that these "snapshots" will trigger your own questions.

Good Teachers

Listen to individual students

Show their personal sides

Allow us to individually experience curriculum

Promote our membership with peers

Recognize our potential

The Good Teacher

Qualities students want in teachers

Listening to the students tell their stories about schools and teachers provided rich insights into qualities that embody a "good teacher." The following information comes from students who were eager and ready to talk about school experiences. They were students with disabilities who came with unique insights and individual stories.

As students described the "best teacher" and related experiences with their teachers, the following characteristics of a good teacher unfolded. Students were quick to connect pleasant experiences with a teacher, noting how teachers "helped." Students discussed meaningful ideas and offered personal advice for teachers. Students were able to remember a particular teacher and characteristics of the teachers who "helped" them to succeed. Just as important were qualities students mentioned that tainted their school experiences. The following quotes reflect both of these perspectives. Both sets of insights, we believe, speak to what students hope for from a good teacher.

Good Teachers . . .
Listen to individual students

They (teachers) must love what they are doing and have a real closeness with each individual student as well as a class. It appeared that "helping" to some students meant that a teacher was available to them. Listening to the student and finding a time for the student were linked to the teacher who "helped." One student explained, *The best part of school is getting extra help from the teachers.*

I love it when the teacher has an opportunity to help me after class. Even though I have an instructional assistant, it is really beneficial when the teacher is willing to sit down with me for five minutes after class or before class and go over things with me. Because I am in mainstreamed classes, there are some things I don't understand, just like it is for a normal student.

The teachers need a requirement before they can teach, to take a listening class.

She (the teacher) got me mainstreamed my sophomore year. She had me mainstreamed by fall my junior year. I was in regular classes and independent study, and then I could get help. She was really nice. She would stay after school to help me. I had her home phone number. I could call her anytime I needed help.

Someone who is willing to take the time to listen to you and help you out with your problems at school. To understand the kind of problems you are having outside of school.

She was always there to help.

Good Teachers . . .
Show their personal sides and develop relationships with students

Compassionate. I really don't like the teacher that is cold and kind of heartless.

I had a group of favorite teachers in high school. I knew them good away from school. We went out and did things. There was one of those teachers that was also in a wheelchair.

It's nice to have someone to talk to. A lot of teachers at (name of high school), say, "Oh you're here." They'll brush you aside and only focus on their prize students.

She accepted you as a person--the way you are. She was just a really nice person.

She was there when I needed her to help me. She was there as a friend to talk to. Someone who was around.

She was really nice and I still see her every once in awhile.

There was not enough love in the environment. It was just like I didn't have much of a desire. There was a lot of impatience. They weren't patient.

I like that you can see that they care about you. Like, Mr. Thorn he says he cares about me, but I don't think he does. My mom says, "Well he says he cares about you. " Well, maybe he does care about me, but I don't see it in him. They think that us kids don't understand anything. They can say anything. "That oh yeah, we care about them. We are supporting them." My mom believes Mr. Thorn. But they (teachers) don't tell you the truth. They are doing their job, Sometimes it comes from their heart. That is what I want when they make you feel at home.

Interviewer: How do you know when a teacher is talking from their heart? What does a teacher do to make you feel at home?
They laugh with you. Or they talk softly. They keep it private with you.

Good Teachers . . .
Allow students to individually experience their curriculum

Some students with disabilities recognized when teachers shifted teaching methods and planned their curriculum to include all students. As teachers experiment with interactive teaching strategies, such as "cooperative learning," some students are noticing the changes. One high school student recognized the "cooperative learning" teaching strategy as one that included him as an active participant with other class members, allowing him to "say good-bye" to his instructional assistant. More often students talked about the ways teaching methods considered differences in individual learning styles. Students remember teachers who left them out. The strategies students identified reflected what they liked in teachers or what they *wanted* to have from a teacher. These teaching strategies were means to foster environments that welcomed students with diverse abilities.

Another thing I really enjoy is when they (teachers) do group cooperative learning in classrooms. Because it gives me a chance to say good-bye to my aide for awhile. It lets the students see what I need and the group takes over. It is also an opportunity to make new friends which is always helpful . . . . It is a break from the normal curriculum. It gives you a chance to see other people's ideas other than in a class discussion. For disabled people it is a deviation from the norm, because we are relying on our aides a lot. Some of my friends don't need an aide for anything but to get their books or something like that.

If you (the student) don't understand the lecture to have them (the teacher) rephrase.

It is great if the teacher can give me advanced notice when we are going to be reading certain books, so they can be ordered on tape. My English teacher does that. I get most things on tape, because the auditory channel is really fast for me to learn.

If the teacher can sometimes blow the thing (written text) up instead of always being the student's responsibility. Because when I have to send my aide, a part of myself is leaving and I can't be all that effective as a student. Sometimes I will send my aide to enlarge something and the teacher will have given a pop quiz or something. I have to give 20 minutes of my own time.

I took a science class and the teacher with an interpreter was there. I was trying to follow what the instructor was saying. I couldn't understand so I would ask a lot of questions and I would miss a lot of things. It was quite frustrating. When the teacher was finished, I would go up and talk to the teacher and ask if we could get another student to copy notes for me using NCR paper. Then I could watch the interpreter and teacher, and it made it a lot easier for me.

I think that they should have teachers teach at different speeds. Like maybe have some teachers teach the same exact subjects, but maybe one at a slower pace and then a medium-type pace. Then a fast pace for somebody who can learn really fast.

Another thing is explaining what you are doing. You know teachers do different things. Someone can explain something to me, and I'll be like, "What are you talking about?" But someone explaining it in common sense terms no matter how difficult it is, they explain it commonly. I can catch on to it real quick. I know I can do just about anything. As long as it is explained to me really easy. That was my big problem growing up in school was that, the explaining part. She tried to help me out. She gave me more time to turn in my stuff, when I had problems.

Have a meeting by one teacher at the end of the day. To go over everything that you learned.

They just need to make the letters bigger.

(When teachers use cooperative teaching you) *Get other people's opinions how they filled out the subject and everything to get to know our classmates more. You get to know the teacher more by everybody talking in a group. When you're just working by yourself you say, "I have to get this done." Who cares what they're thinking about? You don't get to know your classmates as much . . . watching 30 people.*

When teachers' methods did not work for the student

When students felt their teachers did not promote an environment for all learners, the images from prior experiences were still vivid in the students' stories, despite the number of years that had passed. For some students, teachers — perhaps unknowingly — made students feel that they didn't belong with their class members. One student reframed the experience he had with a teacher by saying, ***It is his teaching method, it is not our problem.***

Well when he goes to explain something the kids don't get it. He expects us to know what he is talking about. He embarrasses people. He says, "You will have to go out of the room." Like that and the class is all silent and the class is looking at you. It is embarrassing.

I asked him nicely if he wouldn't embarrass me and I wouldn't embarrass him. I don't know how I embarrass him. He didn't really pay attention to me. Like he really didn't keep his promise to me.

I don't want them to not discipline me. I don't want them to discipline me in front of the whole class. I am not saying that they shouldn't discipline. They don't have to yell . . . . Sometimes he tells the kids in front of everybody. I would rather he give me a signal or something. He could go by the desk and touch it.

I belonged to a club, but the teacher wasn't receptive to my needs. The club is run by the teacher. My school has two levels. They have a really slow chair lift that gets me or disabled people up. You end up maybe 5-10 minutes late on average everyday if you use that lift to get to class. Either you are late or you have to go out of the class early. It isn't a problem for the teachers, but it is a problem for me because I don't want to lose that instructional time. He was very unaccommodating. We asked him to move the club downstairs, but he wouldn't move the club downstairs. Nobody would really work with me. My family worked with me. I only had three teachers in my whole school career that actually worked with me. The rest of them was like, "Well she can either do it up to the speed we're doing it at, or she can forget it."

Give the students more test time or if you don't understand something give the student five minutes out of their prep time to explain something for them. If you don't understand the lecture to have them rephrase that. I have a teacher that shoots the student down and tell them you have to think. We do think, we aren't able to come up with the answer.

Tied to some of the comments about other supports in the school were comments by a few students related to the use of "helpers" or "assistants." Some students thought that assistants were not always helpful and in fact contributed or "added to the problem." Others talked of a place for their tutor or helper, but sought opportunities to release them. These ideas are critical to consider when thinking what, and how much, support to provide students with disabilities in inclusive environments. In these quotes the students refer to their tutors or personal assistants.

He (assistant) writes for me basically everything. I am capable for writing myself, but I use my aide for speed. He also helps me interpret if I can't see the writing. I dictate to him and he writes. My assistant is basically my medium for getting the thoughts on the paper.

I don't use him (his assistant) because the other students are able to help. Like when we have a group writer for the entire group.

One of the things I would change is we have what is called AA's (assistant teachers) at school. A lot of these assistant teachers aren't doing any good. I mean they're just, they're sucking up space. They need to be either helping us or they need to be gone because they're not doing anything.

I resent some of these people so-called helpers in school, they're just adding to the problem and I think it should stop.

Good Teachers . . .
Promote membership with peers

Some students also talked about how particular teaching methods promoted everyone's participation while at the same time making students feel "they have something to contribute to the class." One student felt that all people benefit when everyone is involved in the learning process.

When you separate the group into small groups it brings out the special abilities of everyone in the group. Sometimes my teacher will put me in groups where people aren't doing so well and let me tutor them for awhile. Having someone with the right answers can help them learn.

You make the kid feel like they have something to contribute to the class. Maybe make sure, like call on them for class discussions. Like in my English class a lot of it is discussions. It gets the ideas circulating around the class.

People can benefit from the other resources and students. It is a way to get other students excited about the discussion. It is like a chain reaction.

Good Teachers . . .
Use "hands-on things" to make learning meaningful

More hands-on classes because a lot of people learn in different ways.

Well, I guess my favorite teacher would be my forestry teacher. I guess the reason is because it was a lot less school work and a lot more going out and doing things. We'd just go rappelling, climbing, and doing timber carnivals. I used to work for him from 87-89, I would work on the weekends and in the summer. He had like a subcontracting job for the Forest Service. He was a pretty handy guy.

In my junior year of high school, my history teacher made it really fun. He did a lot of hands-on things.

I liked his methods of teaching and his storytelling.

They shouldn't be set (so set in their ways) *that "Here's your stuff. Read it. This is what you need to know." It should be more hands-on.*

Good Teachers . . .
Recognize the potential in all of us: When teachers foster individual growth

She gave me gobs of work. I don't know if she realized she was teaching me how to strive. She wanted to show the people what she could do as a teacher. But, if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't strive for where I am today. She gave me a lot of work. She disciplined me.

I felt like she really helped me out. She wanted me to learn things.

When teachers do not foster individual growth

Sometimes the teachers underestimate the student's ability.

Students that have learning disabilities, they (teachers) won't encourage them to try it out. They hold them back. You're not ready to take this class yet. I think they should encourage you to try to take the normal classes. Instead of discouraging you.

If they would just let me try. I want to try but the teachers won't let me try.

I think the teachers should try me out on a few things---see what my limitations are. Let me try some things on the computer. I may sneak into the class because I really want to do this stuff and they are holding me back. I am learning stuff in the classroom but I want to learn stuff on the computer.

As the restructuring of educational systems evolves around the country, educators are observing the results of such efforts, particularly those that have been coined "first order changes" (Cuban, 1984; Kahne, Goren & Amsler, 1991). Changes in curriculum content, assessment measures and school financing formulas are examples of first order changes (Kahne, Goren & Amsler, 1991). Cuban (1984) suggests that the second order changes — those that require changes in pedagogy or daily practices — may be the slowest and hardest to achieve. Perhaps reflected in the students' experiences were examples of the areas that are slowest in changing as they relate to teachers' methods. Understandably, a teacher's world is complex and classroom environments cannot be reduced to a few variables. The suggestions that students provided for teachers might contribute to the creation of meaningful changes, and perhaps be implemented with little "restructuring."

Lasting Images

We have broke a lot of ground in the last 10 years. But people are still ignorant.

I think there should be a class that teaches people that people with disabilities are different people, yet they are intelligent like normal people . . . Break some of the differences. If students have questions they should ask.

The thing I'd like to change, is people teasing you . . . teasing you about your disabilities.

I would like that nobody teased you.

Lasting Images And The Perceptions Of Others

The image of disability is changing. Yesterday's posters of children with disabilities whether intentionally or unintentionally, reinforced and contributed to feelings of pity and perceptions of helplessness. Reflected in current legislation and social movements is the recognition that people with disabilities are self-reliant and contributing members to society. Changes are gradual and to be effective must keep a consistent momentum. In the words of the students we talked with were reminders of past images lingering in the halls of today's schools. The meaning of disability that was socially constructed in prior years has established cultural norms that still exist today.

Perceptions can be deeply embedded in a school's culture, noted by the structure of the educational programs, curriculum, and directly attached to the words and actions of others. Reflected in the words of the students we interviewed was the importance of peers' perceptions. The students' experiences were recalled quickly and with details readily remembered. The images that were created in the students' stories suggest how some school experiences are constructed in part by the words and actions of peers. Schools need to further consider how to build social places that value each person's unique characteristics and the idea that knowing someone as a person is important. As one student said, **"I'd like to change the attitudes of all the kids. They need to get to know you a lot better."**

For many students their school experiences were marked by their peers' reactions to their disabilities

Sometimes they made fun of you because you're not as fast as the rest, or good as the rest.

They didn't make me feel good, made me cry, made me feel out of place.

People teased me about the way I walk. . .sometimes about the way I talk. They tease me about my handicap.

I 'd just cry, or something and get upset (when people teased).

Once these two boys that I didn't like made fun of me because I used to wear glasses. They used to call me "four eyes." They put a pin in my seat, it was so rude.

It's really difficult. They don't know you have this learning disability but when they find out they look down on you and make you feel stupid. We're just as smart as they are. I think they need to have it so people understand that a learning disability doesn't mean you're stupid. That's one thing that's really hard.

They make you feel stupid. I have a disability in reading and it's like they don't want you to read in class or something. They won't encourage you to do that. The students around you make little comments about you and stuff, it just makes you feel really stupid.

People look at you like they're looking down at you. I don't want to feel that way. I feel stupid, you know. I never talk out. I didn't like the people or the way they treated me.

Well, mostly I was made fun of by a friend, because she mostly made fun of me. Because I didn't have very many friends and because I was shy.

I didn't really like people calling me retarded, even though I know I am. I didn't like being called that.

Sometimes I didn't like the kids in the classes. They were pretty immature.

Whenever I'd come in the cafeteria they would put napkins over their face. They were ignorant. I was the only person there with a disability.

Some of the kids at the school talk about the mentally retarded kids. I hear talk all the time about them. It just gets me a little angry that I hear it. They're smart but other people don't acknowledge that and it's kind of hard on a person.

Teachers and their perceptions; how the students saw them

The students talked about the perceptions of other peers in their stories about teasing. They also addressed teachers' perceptions directly. Teachers do not unveil their views of disability in the same ways as peers. However, their teaching methods and the way in which they design educational and social environments may subtly or not so subtly reflect their attitudes and beliefs.

You'll get labeled with all the administrators as "that's a bad kid." They treat you different. They follow you around and they watch you all the time. They're way too overprotective like the schools that I've been in.

I think the teacher should treat people differently.

The teachers, they didn't treat me like I was a person. I felt they looked at my chair, and then looked at me. I don't feel that they taught me, that they treated me like a regular person, and that really bothered me. I feel like they didn't really give me a chance to prove myself.

As we move to developing student outcomes that are linked to values, we need to become aware of the ways in which attitudes and biases can subtly and unknowingly be projected. Changing educational experiences means more than restructuring systems, curriculum, or daily teaching practices. The perceptions of others will in part shape the experiences that students with disabilities will have in schools (Schnorr, 1990).

There are many levels of inclusion; certainly placement, curricu-

lum and social aspects are components of inclusion. A continual monitoring of the social aspects of inclusion involves reflecting on our behaviors, methods, actions, words and observing ourselves as we move through change. How are we creating environments that foster healthy attitudes and accepting relationships that consider the unique abilities of all students?

Students' Views of Inclusive Environments

I like regular education better than special education. Why is that?

It would have full integration.

Yeah, that is what I want: inclusion. . .that would break down social opinions of other groups. If everyone included everyone else than there wouldn't be any stereotypes. . . . And everyone would know what everyone could contribute to the school.

Students' Views of Inclusive Environments

"I like regular education better than special education. Why is that?" An adult woman with Down's Syndrome posed this question during an interview with one of the researchers. When the question was returned to her, "Why is that?" she could not answer, but again stated that she liked "regular education." While most students reflected on specific experiences or described a specific teacher, a few students talked about their educational experiences as they related to special education. As schools move to provide more inclusive environments and to reconfigure curriculum, it is important to understand from the student's view point what this may mean.

I felt I wasn't getting mainstreamed early enough. I felt I was in separate classes or all special education.

I see a lot of students, the TMR (trainable mentally retarded) students in there at lunch and a lot of students just go over there and hang out and realize that they are normal people. A lot of time if you have people cooped up in one part of the school, they are running their own totally separate program. It doesn't work that way. That is one of the reasons I wanted to get out of the resource room.

*They have TMR kids, I am not using that as a label. I just need something to call them. They do the entire recycling program. They made the recycling boxes and pick up the recycling bottles. If we weren't recycling we would be wasting a lot of products . . . . **I think they are contributing to the student body by making them (the student body) more educated about people with disabilities and helping them understand cognitive disability.***

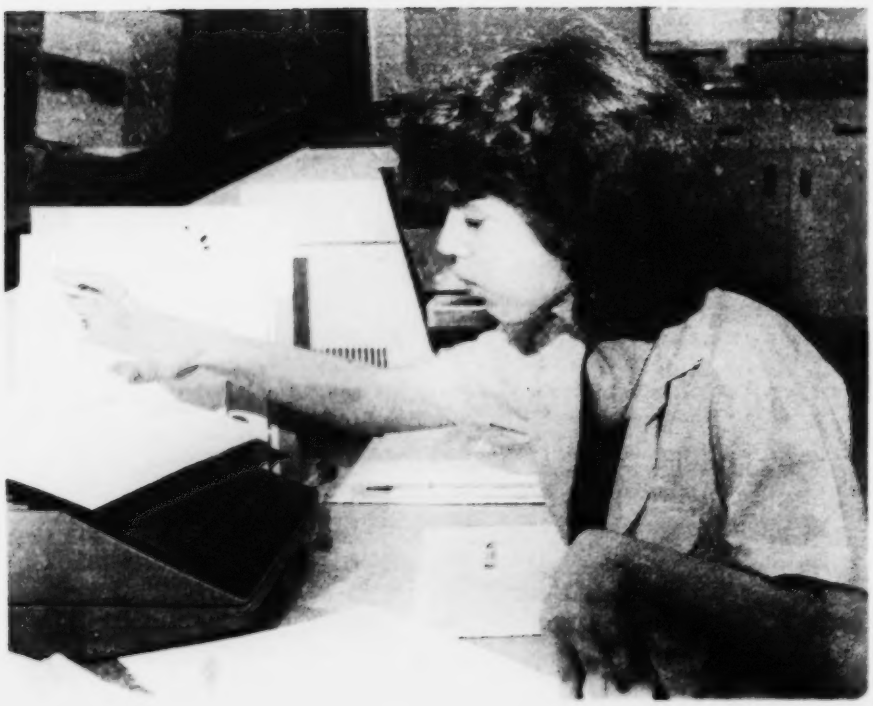
Reflected in this quote are the ideas Ferguson (1990) has discussed related to changing the "standard which we use for determining an individual's contributions and participation." Ferguson suggests we consider our value of *productivity* alongside a value that considers the *mere presence* of the person with significant disabilities. In the thoughts of the high school student above are the ideas that the presence of students with severe disabilities is contributing to the understanding of others in the student body. The student viewed the work the students completed in the recycling program as secondary to other contributions that individuals with severe disabilities can offer.

Preparing for Life
And "Not Just For Fast-Food Jobs"

I don't think I learned that much that I need to know as an adult. I think they should have more in the high school, like work programs.

The stuff that your friends tell you is important... There' s no incentive to go to school other than to see your friends.

I don't think there should be just fast food work experience. I like landscaping. People should get a taste of what they could get out of the job market. They should get a job they like and keep. Instead of just going straight and getting a fast food job and then saying, "Damn I'm quitting. I don't like this."



Preparing For Life

Reading, writing and arithmetic. Students remember much more in their school experiences than their academic studies. As schools strive to improve ways to prepare students for life after school, students continue to articulate the value in the social aspects of school, and in learning the skills significant for adulthood. The students we talked with readily mentioned the importance of the social aspects of their schooling, usually noting friends as being central. Mixed into these conversations were discussions of leisure activities embedded in their school experiences. Interestingly, research and practices in transition planning for young adults increasingly reflect recognition of the importance of socialization in the lives of all individuals (Rusch, 1990). The importance of this area as central to school experiences should not merely be considered a secondary outcome of education. In a report by the New Hampshire Developmental Disabilities Council, "loneliness" was identified as a problem for over 60% of 288 people interviewed. Thus, students reminded us once again that school is a place for learning self-esteem and confidence in social skills to cope with life's experiences beyond the time of public school.

In addition to the social aspects of school experiences, students mentioned the kinds of subjects and skills they thought were critical for life as an adult. The transition from school to adult life can have different meanings among teachers, administrators and the public (Rusch, Symanski & Chadsey-Rusch, 1992) and imply different types of transitions (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Jones, 1988). As noted by Racino (1992) we must devise ways to allow the voice of the student to "predominate" in order to understand and plan for meaningful changes that prepare today's students for adulthood.

Certainly, the area of transition from secondary education to postsecondary settings has progressed in the past 10 years to current recommended practices (Halpern, 1992). Current issues relate to long-term funding bases (Braddock, 1987; McDonnell, Ferguson, & Mathot-Buckner, 1992), personnel training, curriculum and expanding inclusive options. As students noted, they were given opportunities to learn new skills for employment. However, some students noted that the variety of jobs or employment options were limited. This may be important to consider as we further expand current practices to "inventory" students' interests and skills necessary for employment. It is time to turn to our students. What do they say about what they have gleaned in school and how it has prepared them for adulthood?

The social aspects of school

When I was in school, I hated elementary and high school except for socializing. I had a lot of friends who all were into sports. I basically liked my friends and the weekends.

The social skills helped me to communicate better.

I liked my friends.

I liked the school dances and the social times. I liked leaving the school campus for lunch.

The social aspect was mainly the only reason why I stayed in school.

Leisure activities

Most of my social skills that I acquired from school came not from any interaction in the classroom, but from sports where you're willing to work together from that stand point of team.

I auditioned for plays and got my first acting role in the "Miracle Worker" in my freshman year.

I liked band. I played the clarinet.

Well I liked the sports, activities and my friends.

Things to know after leaving school

I really liked the Life Skills Network because they not only taught you about academics, they taught you cooking and shopping.

Welding, mechanics, wood shop. I'd have to say the thing I liked most about school was that they offered classes that did help people with future careers.

They taught me how to deal with supervisors and jobs. They even took me out on a real job site.

They teach you in school how to write checks and how to balance a checkbook. They don't teach you about when you get a bill how to go over it and make sure it's correct. Or how to go out and find your own apartment. They don't teach you to go out and look for a vehicle or what kind of questions to ask. Those things are really necessary.

The role of academics: making academics meaningful for students

They taught me how to read and write and spell real good. They taught me how to do my math best I could. I did learn some science stuff and some landscaping stuff.

They taught me how to read and spell real good.

Maybe they need to teach you more how to be a responsible person and still integrate the English, math, the writing and reading. But then have it more relaxed and more up-to-date.

Implications For Reform Efforts

What can schools do to incorporate student ideas in reform efforts?

Implications For Reform Efforts

We hope that these "snapshots" of data have informed you of some ways that students may view school and their lasting impressions of their school experiences. The insights of students are invaluable as the students are the center of our educational reform efforts. Students in this project highlighted the importance of their relationships with teachers and the social aspects of school. Enmeshed in their comments were ideas for how their peers and teachers could understand them as capable individuals with abilities to contribute to the school and community.

As our staff read through transcripts and developed the themes, we generated questions that may assist others when considering how students might contribute in the process of making change. These questions were designed for the purpose of stimulating your thinking and for reflecting on your current practices with students. Perhaps you have other questions or procedures that could be shared with others.

1. How have students been included in defining the values, vision and mission for their learning?

2. Do students with disabilities ask for different kinds of educational situations or methods than other learners in the student body?

3. Are teachers asking students, "How can I help you?" Is there a clear mechanism for students to communicate their ideas to teachers and administrators?

4. How are students involved in the ongoing evaluation of the change process taking place in your program? Are a variety of measures being used?

5. Are students involved with the teachers in designing their curriculum?

6. Are all learners involved in joint meetings to discuss the change process? Are students with disabilities included with their peers in discussions of changes that affect all the student body?

We invite your comments and your suggestions for continuing this work.

The staff of the
Western Regional Resource Center

Appendix A

Methods

A qualitative research approach was utilized for consistency with the purpose of the study. Of the qualitative methods available, we decided to use focus groups. There were several reasons that the focus group approach was used. First, we wanted to understand from the multiple perspectives of individuals with disabilities their experiences of school. The open-ended response form of the focus group provides rich opportunity to collect data in the respondents' own words (Krueger, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Focus groups are flexible, allowing for exploration of various topics from a variety of individuals. In addition, for some participants literacy skills were low. An oral interview provided a means to rephrase questions or ask for clarification. Lastly, a focus group approach is well suited to "inform or assess educational policy and practice" (Brotherson & Goldstein, 1992, p. 335).

This report is based on interviews conducted over a nine-month period, in which data were collected from 33 key participants. Our team developed questions for an interview protocol that guided the initial focus group interviews. The initial questions for the protocol were driven by our analyses of the educational literature on reform, our personal experiences, our working relationships with colleagues from school districts, and our work with individual states and programs on these issues. These questions served as a departure point and became refined as the respondents informed the data analysis. Examples of some of the initial questions included: What did you like about school? What did you dislike? Describe your best teacher. Describe the perfect school. What would you change about school?

Individual interviews supplemented the focus group interviews with more details about the information that emerged in the focus groups. The respondents raised issues that were broader than the initial protocol and that required more in-depth examination. The questions were further refined and modified as the data were analyzed.

The individuals interviewed included young adults (up to 25 years of age), high school students and a few children. All individuals had at least one disability, and the types of disabilities were varied. Some were students, some held jobs and were going to school part-time, and others were employed and living in group homes. Interviews were conducted in homes, agency offices, places of employment, restaurants, and school buildings. Focus

groups consisted of 6-12 individuals ranging in age from 16-21 years old. The individual interviews were conducted with individuals who ranged in age from 10-25 years. A variety of local resources were used to contact the focus group participants, including rehabilitation centers, the community college, organizations for individuals with disabilities, and connections through the school system. The length of the interviews varied from one hour to over two hours in length. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in order to capture the respondents' original words. Several of us from the research team were involved in conducting the interviews, debriefing and sharing field notes. The two project directors completed the actual data analysis and reduced the data into codes, categories and themes.

Coding and analysis consisted of going through the transcript text line by line, summarizing and reflecting on words of the individuals. The transcripts and field notes were coded and placed in categories and sorted based on the coded data. The themes presented in this document are based on these processes. Other sources for a complete description of data analysis used in qualitative approaches can be found in Bogdan & Biklen (1982) and Patton (1990). The combination of focus and individual interviews served to triangulate the sources of data collection as well as reach out to individuals with varying disabilities. In addition, the various perspectives of our research team provided multiple sources for sifting data, "triangulating" perspectives, interpreting and peer debriefing.

Appendix B

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